

# ***Biblical Situation Ethics***

## **Or**

# ***Biblical Situation Ethics***

## ***Graded Absolutism***



When one reflects upon “situation ethics,” one must distinguish between biblical situation ethics and humanist situation ethics. Is everything always “black” or “white”? Are there ever any gray areas? Is there such a thing as “graded absolutism”? In other words, do some laws take precedence over other laws? Is there ever a time in which mercy takes the lead over law? Can one be guilty of legalism in dealing with others? When two laws appear to conflict with one another, does the higher law take supremacy over the lower law? What does graded absolutism mean? These are questions that this paper seeks to deal with.

To begin this essay, it will be helpful to briefly observe two men of distinction who have addressed themselves to the subject of situation ethics without differentiating between biblical and humanist situation ethics. Dave Miller<sup>[1]</sup> and Bert Thompson<sup>[2]</sup> wrote articles about **Matthew 12:1-8** from which they drew certain conclusions about “situation ethics.” Both men seek to preserve the Word of God as applicable to every area of one’s life—and everyone must seek this same obedience. But in their analysis of **Matthew 12** and situation ethics, it appears that they are arguing against Joseph Fletcher’s “situation ethics”<sup>[3]</sup> rather than biblical “situation ethics.”

Everyone is a situational ethicist. Even Dave Miller and Bert Thompson cannot escape applying the principles of situational ethics to certain aspects of their own lives. All people make decisions upon the existential situation. The distinction between Fletcher’s ethics and biblical ethics is as far apart as the East is from the West. Today, the phrase “situation ethics” does not communicate adequately the truths binding upon God’s children. Since “situation ethics” convey negative overtones, perhaps another term may express more fittingly the truths contained in the Scriptures, namely, “graded absolutism.”<sup>[4]</sup> This expression conveys more accurately the teachings of God for our society and culture. How one phrases certain truths or untruths often hinges upon clichés

employed to convey the truth or untruth intended. In other words, word groups can be very deceptive.

## PHRASEOLOGY

In analyzing “situation ethics,” it is necessary that one consider the appropriateness of certain expressions to express adequately the concept of biblical situation ethics. Since slogans or phrases are a part of our culture, one may attach good or sinister motives. Expressions may be good or bad depending upon the situation. Sayings communicate or describe thoughts or events. Cliches may be utilized to cover some clandestine operation—that is, some heinous, abhorrent, abominable, atrocious, inhuman, monstrous crime.

### Gay Individuals

To illustrate the above paragraph, one only needs to reflect upon certain terms that no longer convey the same type imagery that it did just a few years ago. Presently one does not dare speak of an individual as “gay.” Originally the word had a good connotation (implied meaning). For instance, a few years ago, when one spoke of a person as “gay,” one simply meant that person was radiant, animated, and lively. But now, when an individual refers to a person as “gay,” one has reference to his or her sexual preference; the word “gay” now identifies individuals that are homosexual, bisexual, or effeminate.<sup>[5]</sup> Even though this word “gay” is still an excellent word, nevertheless, this word must be used with caution.

### Freedom of Choice

Another slogan that has a good ring is ‘freedom of choice.’ There is nothing wrong in-and-of-itself concerning this idiom, but, on the other hand, the pro-abortionist advocates (those in favor of murdering the unborn) choose this cliché to advocate an individual’s right to kill one’s baby if she so desires—freedom of choice, so it is maintained, is everyone’s right, so defends the pro-abortionist.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Illegal Use of Words in Hitler’s Germany

To cite another example, John S. Powell demonstrates forcefully the illegal use of words to cover sinister operations in Hitler’s Germany.<sup>[7]</sup> He exhibits the ideas of “newspeak” as presented in Orwell’s books *1984*<sup>[8]</sup> and *Animal Farm*.<sup>[9]</sup> Powell captures graphically the ideas of Orwell’s depiction of the illegal use of phrases to cover-up one’s terribly harmful motives. Powell tells of the “Killing Centers” that Hitler organized to exterminate the undesirables.<sup>[10]</sup> The amazing thing about Hitler’s clandestine operation was the euphemistic terms he adopted to camouflage the exterminating centers.

One such organization established for the extermination of the sick and disabled, he called the “Realm’s Work Committee of Institutions for Cure and Care.”<sup>[11]</sup> Another establishment, devoted exclusively to the killing of children, was known by the name of “Realm’s Committee for Scientific Approach to Severe Illness Due to Heredity and Constitution.”<sup>[12]</sup> A third group, who processed questionnaires for these organizations,

was called the “Charitable Transport Company for the Sick.”<sup>[13]</sup> Finally, another agency, which collected the cost of the killings from the families, was called the “Charitable Foundation for Institutional Care.”<sup>[14]</sup>

The organizational names that Hitler gave to the “killing centers” were names that had a “good ring” to the concerned. But he misused the wording in the same way that Fletcher prostituted the expression “situation ethics.” Since Fletcher has given an unbiblical connotation to this phrase,<sup>[15]</sup> then, one needs to choose a term that will more adequately express the teachings of God whenever he or she confronts a situation in which one must make a choice between two absolutes or between “mercy” or “law.” When one makes a choice between two absolutes, this is known as “graded absolutism.”<sup>[16]</sup>

The Scriptures provide many examples of “graded absolutism.” Often the selection that an individual makes between two moral duties depends on the situation. In other words, the believer is exempt from his duty to the “lower law” by virtue of his obedience to the “higher law.” It is not that the Christian does not believe in God’s absolutes, but one believes that under certain conditions, some laws are “weightier”<sup>[17]</sup> than other laws (**Matthew 23:23**). Did not Jesus speak of the “least” and the “greatest”<sup>[18]</sup> commandments (**Matthew 5: 19**)?

## SITUATION ETHICS

The above background concerning the improper utilization of expressions calls for further elaboration about the phrase “situation ethics.” This designation in-and-of-itself is not bad terminology; but, like many other good sayings, it has received an ill-conceived connotation, that is to say, everything goes. In spite of its misuse, “Few positions are totally without any merit. There is usually enough truth in any false view to make it hold [some] water” writes Geisler.<sup>[19]</sup> At the moment, “situational ethics” is a theory of knowledge that does not believe that there are any moral absolutes by which man is to be governed.<sup>[20]</sup> To state more forcefully, the situationist believes that “man is the center of all things”; that is, man is his own God; he himself decides what is right and what is wrong. Man becomes his own God. Every Christian must reject this atheistic philosophy—a philosophy that is totally destructive to any society.<sup>[21]</sup>

It is necessary for every person to make a distinction between biblical situation ethics and humanistic situation ethics. In biblical situation ethics, one seeks to make application to various circumstances founded upon biblical principles, not simply that the “end justifies the means.” To accomplish biblical situation ethics, one must search for terminology that will more adequately define or express God’s standards. One such phrase is “graded absolutism.” This designation expresses more accurately the idea of biblical situation ethics as expressed in the Bible. In other words, “graded absolutism” is simply the “person-in-the-situation” as taught in Holy Scripture.

## GRADED ABSOLUTISM

In “graded absolutism,” there are higher and lower moral laws.<sup>[22]</sup> In other words, not all moral laws are of equal weight. Jesus spoke, as mentioned above, of the “**more**

important matters of the law”<sup>[23]</sup> (**Matthew 23:23**) and of the “least” (**5:19**) and of the “great”<sup>[24]</sup> (**22:36**). From these three citations of Scripture, one observes that moral laws are hierarchically graded, that is, various levels in moral laws. Since there are different levels in moral laws, there may be times in which moral conflicts are unavoidable in which an individual cannot obey both commands of God simultaneously.

Every Christian is commanded to submit to God and to civil authorities. But what happens when these two powers come into conflict? There are times in which a Christian cannot conform to both at the same time. Seeking the proper solution to our dilemmas is not always the easiest thing to learn. Since everyone’s knowledge is imperfect, one must not be dogmatic in his or her decisions. Geisler correctly states the difficulty:

An absolutist often overstates one’s case, acting as though one has an absolute understanding of absolutes. Antinomians [those without law] make a contribution to ethics by stressing the relative dimension. Finite man does not have an infinite understanding of the infinite. Paul said, “now I know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). The basic ethical principles are absolute, but our human perspective on them is less than absolute. In pointing to our changing understanding of God’s unchanging moral law, antinomians have rendered an unwitting service to Christian ethics.<sup>[25]</sup>

## **GOD AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT**

To explain by example the concept of “graded absolutism,” consider the following biblical problem of two absolutes in conflict: (1) one’s responsibility to obey government, and (2) to obey God. Paul says, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (**Romans 13:1**). This is the law of God; everyone must submit to government. But are there no exemptions to this absolute?<sup>[26]</sup> An example of the “exemption” concept is the tax laws of the US government. Often the government will make an “exemption” from the tax laws because of particular situations, but the law still stands. The United States government made exemptions for filing tax returns for the service men while in Saudi, Arabia; nevertheless, the tax law is still absolute in its intended meaning.

Christians are commanded by God to submit to governing authorities; this command from God is an absolute truth. But what does one do if the governing authorities demand compliance with things that are contrary to loyalty to God’s commandments? In seeking a solution to the above dilemma, one must turn to the Scriptures for clarification. The Bible addresses itself to the concept of two absolutes coming into conflict with one another. For example, the case of Peter and John are called forth to enhance the dilemma of two supreme laws coming into friction. Peter and John were summoned before the Sanhedrin, who then “commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”; but they answered, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (**Acts 4:18-19**). They faced a dilemma. What should be done in such a difficulty? Should they obey God or man? They obeyed the higher law, namely, submission to God; thus, the apostles resolved the conflict. Geisler correctly states, “God is the one absolute basis for all laws that reflect His nature, and each

law is absolutely binding on the particular activity it governs.”<sup>[27]</sup>

## TRUTH TELLING VERSUS FALSE TELLING

### Rahab the Harlot

To cite another case dealing with biblical situation ethics, one should reflect upon Rahab’s “false telling” versus “truth telling,” which stands as a classic. What should she have done? Should she have practiced deception to save the spies? What was right? What was wrong? What would you have done? Should one always tell the truth despite circumstances? Hasn’t everyone been confronted with the dilemma of when to tell or when not to tell the truth? Are there ever any “exemptions” to the command not to tell falsehoods? Does God withhold accountability from the person who demonstrates mercy to the innocent rather than truth telling to the guilty? What does the Word of God assert concerning mercy to the innocent instead of “truth telling” to the guilty?

Before one seeks an answer to Rahab’s predicament, one should observe what God has said about fabrication. God, through Moses, commanded that one “shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (**Exodus 20:16**). Paul also writes that one “must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor” (**Ephesians 4:25**). Again, Solomon says that “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful” (**Proverbs 12:22**). Now, on the other hand, the Bible records circumstances in which lying was practiced in order to save lives. Were the above Scriptures violated in the actions of Rahab? Can one deceive and still be innocent? Rahab is one such person who exhibited “mercy showing” rather than “truth telling” to the guilty. Rahab hid the spies, who were involved in espionage, from Israel’s enemies and then lied to save their lives (**Joshua 2:1-7**). Did she sin? Did she apply in principle biblical law and truth to the situation? Was she mixed up in “situation ethics”? It seems that God withheld accountability and rewarded her for her “mercy showing” to the people of God rather than “truth telling” to God’s enemies. She practiced what Jesus condemned the Pharisees for not considering—**“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”** (**Matthew 12:7**).

In spite of her deception, God immortalized her in the Book of Hebrew’s “Hall of Fame” (**Hebrews 11:31**). Nowhere does the Bible condemn her for her actions. In fact she is listed in the genealogy of Jesus (**Matthew 1:5**). Her performance was an integral part mercy,<sup>[28]</sup> which God was pleased with; God is a God of mercy.<sup>[29]</sup> In evaluating her difficulty, one must weigh the totality of God’s Word. Everyone should reflect upon the words of the prophet Micah in his admonition to the children of Israel: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (**Micah 6:8**). Again, everyone should reflect upon the words of Jesus to the religious leaders: **“If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent”** (**Matthew 12:7**).

Since God desires mercy more than sacrifice, then, it should not be surprising to any that mercy takes the lead over law. This revelation of God’s kindness should come as a relief to all. For one to comprehend the implications of “truth telling” versus “false telling” and the superiority of one absolute over another absolute, one only needs to read the story of Corrie Ten Boom who lied to the Nazis to save the lives of Jews. Her

deceptions were not evil, but good. Parallels are present between the “then” (Rahab) and the “now” (Corrie Ten Boom).

### The Hebrew Midwives

Another first-class illustration of circumstances determining the direction one should follow is the Hebrew narrative about the Hebrew midwives’ deception to Pharaoh. Moses chronicles this narrative in his second book of the Pentateuch:

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, **“When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.** Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?” The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.” So **God was kind to the midwives** and the people increased and became even more numerous (**Exodus 1:15-20**).

This is another instance of God withholding accountability from individuals who demonstrate “mercy” to the innocent rather than “truth telling” to the guilty. As cited above, Jesus forcefully set forth this truth when he cites the Older Testament along with his comments: **“If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent”** (**Matthew 12:7**).

God’s absolute about falsehood still stands—“Truth telling” and “mercy showing” are both grounded in God’s nature. In God there are no conflicts between these two attributes—“mercy showing” and “truth telling.” But with men there is often conflict between the two. The problem man faces is that occasionally he cannot perform both simultaneously. But, on the other hand, God, in such cases, withholds accountability from the person who demonstrates “mercy” to the innocent rather than “truth telling” to the guilty. Geisler goes right to the heart of the matter in his observation concerning lying in preference to “truth telling” versus “mercy showing” when he writes:

Some would prefer calling this not a “lie” but an “intentional falsification.” Call it what we will, it does not change the fact that it would be morally wrong—unless, of course, one is obeying a higher moral law in so doing. I prefer calling it a “lie” so that it is clearly understood that lying as such (without a higher conflicting law) is wrong.<sup>[30]</sup>

The three examples presented above about (1) “God and Government,” (2) “Rahab and the Spies,” and the (3) “Hebrew Midwives” illustrate that some absolutes are higher than other absolutes. There are graded levels of moral commands in Scripture. Not all moral laws are of equal weight (Matthew 23:23<sup>[31]</sup>; 5:19<sup>[32]</sup>). One must never forget that there may be occasions in which mercy takes priority over law. The Christian has a moral obligation to search the Scriptures in every conflicting situation. Every text must be set in conversation with the whole Bible. Leroy Garrett captures the essence of the “greatest” versus the “least” in his essay, “What I Believe About Situation Ethics.”



Most, if not all, moral problems are solved in part by a reference to it all depends, i.e., it all depends on the situation. Is it right to deceive? Is it right to drive in excess of the speed limit? Is it right to break into your neighbor's house? . . . it is the person in the situation that makes the difference, which means that the view I am defending might better be called "Person-in-the-situation" ethics . . . There is in moral thought a concept known as the "principle of necessity," which says that if it is necessary to act contrary to laws that one would ordinarily honor in order to help someone in an emergency situation, then "what is necessary" takes precedence over law.<sup>[33]</sup>

"What is necessary" often requires one law taking precedence over another law or, to state another way, mercy often takes priority over another known absolute. Remember that laws are made for man's well-being, not man for law. Again, one should recall Jesus' philosophy of "mercy" taking precedence over "law" in his confrontation with the religious leaders who practiced law over mercy. Mark adds additional information to this episode in which Jesus rebukes the leaders of Israel for their lack of mercy:

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:23-28).

What is the difference between the humanistic situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher and the biblical situation ethics of Christians? With Fletcher the circumstances determine what is right or wrong.<sup>[34]</sup> On the other hand, the Christian does not allow the situation to decide what is right or wrong, but, rather, he or she simply allows the situation to assist one in discovering which moral law applies in a difficulty. One must look at the facts and then determine which law of God should be obeyed—or mercy extended. No one should be guilty of: "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

Geisler is on target when he says, "graded absolutism holds that there are more absolutes than one."<sup>[35]</sup> He makes a distinction between the situation ethics of the Bible (graded absolutism) and the situation ethics (antinomianism—without law) of Fletcher.<sup>[36]</sup> Geisler says,

Fletcher believes that the situation determines what one should do in a given case; graded absolutism holds that situational factors only help one to discover what God has determined that we should do. That is, the situation does not fill an empty absolute with content and thereby determine what one would do. Rather, the situational factors merely help one discover which command of God is applicable to that particular case . . . It is true that occasionally the conclusions are the same, but they are based on very different reasons. Hence, the similarities are only accidental and not essential. Fletcher concludes

something is right or wrong because the “existential particularities” of the situation determine it; graded absolutism, on the other hand, concludes something is right or wrong because God has declared it.<sup>[37]</sup>

## MATTHEW 12: GRADED ABSOLUTISM

Jesus sets biblical situational ethics, or graded absolutism, forth in His encounter with the Pharisees.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven’t you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (**Matthew 12:1-8**).

Since **Matthew 12** is called forth as testimony to represent biblical “situation ethics,” or “graded absolutism,” then, it is essential that one carefully analyze this pericope (section). Does this segment of Scripture teach “graded absolutism”? In seeking an answer, one must not confuse the teachings of Fletcher with the teachings of Christ. “Situation ethics” based upon the philosophy of Fletcher must be rejected—it is anti-God. But if one’s idea of ethics is not humanistic in origin but biblical in origin, then, there is no reason to deny the plain teachings of the Scriptures. Some Christians think such a position changes God’s law for the sake of convenience.

Dave Miller, as cited above, complains about the position many Christians take concerning biblical situation ethics. He apparently does not consider an alternative phrase to express the truths of God more accurately for our culture. Miller asserts:

A favorite “proof test” of the situation ethicist and, increasingly, of the libertine within the church, is the incident recorded in Matthew 12:1-9. . . . Some have suggested this passage teaches that times arise within the Christian’s life when he must break the “letter of the law” to keep the “spirit of the law.” They maintain that Jesus permits us to violate His will at times for the sake of convenience. If compliance with His words becomes inconvenient, then those words may be treated as optional. . . . For them, right and wrong, truth and error are obscure, blurred, hazy, gray, and complex. What is wrong in one situation may be right and acceptable in another.<sup>[38]</sup>

It is obvious that Miller overstates his case; he also accuses, without evidence, other believers of manipulation of the law of God to justify one’s own selfish ends. In other words, Miller charges other Christians with blatant disregard for God’s Word by saying, “if I do not like what God said, then, I will violate the law to accomplish my desired ends so that I am obeying the ‘spirit of the law.’” Is this the philosophy of believers? I think not! Christians do not, and must not, advocate the breaking of God’s



law “for the sake of convenience.” He makes this assertion, without facts to substantiate his allegations, against other believers who rely upon Jesus’ teachings in [Matthew 12](#) to draw conclusions that differ with his. These Christians are not guilty of saying, as Miller does, “right and wrong, truth and error are obscure, blurred, hazy, gray, and complex.” He exaggerates his concern.

## THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH FROM THEN TO NOW

An interpreter is often confronted with the hermeneutical question of how to relate the circumstances in life to the situational ethics in the Bible—from *then* to *now*. It is obvious that every interpreter must make the hermeneutical jump from the *then* of the Scriptures to the *now* of the present. This jump must be made on the analogy of Scripture, that is to say, by the principles set forth by the Holy Spirit, not man’s ingenuity to violate Scripture as did the Pharisees ([Matthew 15:1-13](#)). This in-built process of clarification and correction of one’s interpretation is accomplished through apparent analogies and similarities. As one reads the book of Matthew, one discovers broad principles set forth to assist one in his or her interpretation of difficult situations.

An exploration of Matthew’s description of Christ’s confrontation with the religious leaders is most helpful in seeking biblical answers to friction (see [Matthew 12:1-8](#)). For one to be “biblical” in applying the principles set forth by Jesus does not mean that one has to create the same conflicts in order to give the same answers. To illustrate the above principle of “situational ethics,” five additional subjects will be explored to demonstrate the principles set forth by Jesus in [Matthew 12](#):

- monetary assistance to unbelievers
- assistance to someone in need on Sunday
- divorce for other causes than adultery
- observance of the Passover at a different time frame than authorized by God
- two brothers who violate God's law, but not condemned.

### Monetary Assistance to Unbelievers

Paul encouraged the Galatians to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” ([Galatians 6:10](#)). This is a case for “situation ethics.” If one can help only one family or individual—one family belongs to God and the other does not—what criteria must be exercised in determining one’s judgment? This decision presents a predicament for the believer; he or she must choose one or the other. How does one resolve the problem? In this case, the situation resolves the outcome. The believer makes judgment upon the circumstances—everyone is a situational ethicist, whether one likes it or not! This illustration may be somewhat overly simplified. To illustrate, let everyone think about some uncertainties that are more convoluted in nature. The next issue is a little more intricate in nature, but not extremely so. Nevertheless, assistance to someone in need on Sunday may take precedence over the instructions not to abandon the assembly ([Hebrews 10:25](#)).

### Sunday Morning Assembly

If one is on his or her way to the assembly on Sunday morning to meet with the saints and comes across a very bad automobile accident, what action should be taken by the believer? Should he or she continue the journey to the Sunday morning assembly or

should one give assistance rather than continue on the journey so that one does not violate the command to meet?<sup>[39]</sup> If one chooses to place a human being above the Sunday service because of the circumstances, then, this conduct is grounded on situational ethics. In this scenario, the qualifying factors regulate one's deeds. Is this biblical? Is this action based upon situational ethics? To return to the story of David (**1 Samuel 21:1-6; Matthew 12:1-8**), one recalls that David's situation resulted in extreme hunger for himself and his men; but his hunger and need took priority over sacred ritual. David's incidence is the *then* and the automobile accident is the *now*.

### Divorce for Other Causes than Adultery

Should one ever apply the righteousness of mercy to an individual caught in a marriage that is "hell on earth"? Should one have to stay in a marriage in which the husband physically abuses the wife and children? Can one draw principles from the story of David in **Matthew 12** to the subject of divorce for other reasons than sexual immorality? It appears, so it seems, that a close scrutiny of some marriages demand that the standard of mercy takes precedence over law. Is it possible that the state of affairs is the determining factor in deciding whether or not one can divorce for other reasons than sexual immorality?

The question of divorce is a puzzling uncertainty to many Christians. Even though divorce is a very perplexing predicament, one still needs to come out of the closet and deal with the problems that people face daily—the *now*. There are no "pat answers" to all of the problems that people face in every day life that is beyond their control. Everyone should be realistic in his or her approach to divorce. The "nuts and bolts" of life must be dealt with. The topic of divorce and remarriage is much more complex than we wish to admit. There are no "pat answers." Since sin is a part of the society, one must seek answers for solutions to the divorce dilemma from principles set forth in Holy Scripture.

Can you conceive of any circumstance in which divorce would be acceptable to God without sexual immorality on the part of one of the partners? Do you say no? Did Jesus intend to teach that there are no grounds for divorce other than fornication or adultery? When Matthew, Mark, and Luke recorded the divorce sayings of Jesus, did they have in view that His words were a dissertation on the subject of divorce and remarriage?

What about wife abuse, husband abuse, child abuse, desertion, murder, armed robbery, etc. Are these justifiable reasons for divorce? These are issues that need to be answered! Perhaps, a biblical concept of situational ethics or graded absolutism will help to determine the proper course of action. Is there any justification for applying the principle of mercy over law as set forth by Jesus in His confrontation with the religious leaders (**Matthew 12:1-8**)?

It is easy for one to answer emphatically—"no other cause than fornication."<sup>[40]</sup> For many, if one is the victim of ill-treatment or extreme brutality that is still not biblical cause for divorce. In seeking answers to many complex issues, everyone must rely upon God's revelation in its totality, not just proof-texting. One must rely upon God's Word, the standard by which all things must be judged, in judging the principles of right and wrong. When one limits divorce only to sexual immorality, one creates impossible situations for the innocent victim.

To set the stage for the principle of "mercy" over "law," this author presents two stories about murder and wife abuse. These two stories illustrate the "person-in-the-situation" in order to focus upon the words of Jesus in **Matthew 12**. These two accounts are about trauma two women experienced with their husbands who were involved in some

“unclean thing.”<sup>[41]</sup> These two dilemmas should shock everyone into the reality of the heinousness of sin in this depraved world and the dilemma these two women found themselves in .

**CASE NUMBER ONE.** According to a police report, two men (Grady Gibson and Eddie Hart) conspired to kill the wife of Eddie to collect insurance money. This young woman was taken out into the woods, tied to a tree, and almost decapitated by Grady Gibson. He did not have sex with her, he simply cut off her head. Both men, after two years of investigation by the Montgomery Police Department, were convicted of murder. The husband, Eddie Hart, of the dead woman, received a sentence of fifty years; but the other man received life without parole. He is in for life! Now, the question: Is Mrs. Gibson bound to her husband, Grady Gibson, for the rest of her life simply because he did not have sex with the woman he murdered—he just cut her head off? Does she have scriptural grounds to divorce him and remarry, even though adultery was not committed? Some say yes, others say no.

Since Mrs. Gibson’s husband is incarcerated in prison for life, without a chance for parole, What is her situation in regards to divorce and remarriage? Is she bound to him for life since he did not pull off her panties and have sex with her? To begin with, Mrs. Gibson did file a motion (July 7, 1988) with the Circuit Court in Montgomery Alabama for a new trial on behalf of her husband, a former Alabama Bureau Investigation agent for the police department of Montgomery, Alabama. However, later, she eventually divorced her husband—who is imprisoned for the rest of his life. Now the question: What is the status of the wife since the husband did not commit adultery, but murder? Since she divorced her husband, is she free to marry again? Is she bound to this man for the rest of his life? Are there any principles set forth in the Scriptures whereupon one can make a rational decision concerning her predicament? Can she remarry without sinning? One also wonders what woman in her right mind would want to go back to such a brute, even if he were released from prison.

**CASE NUMBER TWO.** On April 20, 1988, the Montgomery Advertiser published excerpts from a letter by an “abused wife.” This woman testified that she “was beaten, stomped, kicked, burned with cigarettes and stabbed.” She also stated that her husband “threw me into a wall so hard that my head went through the paneling. The man was also a gun fanatic. His favorite game when he was drinking was his version of Russian roulette. His gun, my head.” Now the question is: Does God forbid this woman to divorce her husband who is brutal, inhuman, ruthless, savage, uncaring, heartless, cold-blooded, and violent? Does God forbid her divorce since sexual immorality was not involved? Can she divorce him and remarry without sinning if fornication was not involved? Would you say, “bound for life, adultery not committed!” Are there no mitigating circumstances where mercy takes precedence over law? Would Matthew 12 apply in this case? Is this a “now” situation?

### **David and the Bread of the Presence**

Frequently, Christians are treated with the same legality that the religious leaders bound upon the people in the days of Christ (**Matthew 5:21-48**). Those leaders used their Scriptures in an illegal manner to uphold their traditions (**Matthew 15:1-13**), as do many Christians today. This same unconcern for the well being of the person is still practiced by many leaders today, especially elders and preachers, to bring persons into conformity with their demands or face the consequences of excommunication from the so-called faithful brethren. Fred Craddock correctly states the problem:

This problem is as old as the church, for there has always been a tradition preserved in sacred texts with all the uses and misuses that accompany Scripture. Jesus frequently faced the problem of being charged with flying in the face of Scripture.<sup>[42]</sup>

As mentioned above, Matthew records a confrontation of the Pharisees with Jesus (**Matthew 12:1-12**), in which Jesus reminds the leaders that David and his companions violated God's law concerning the eating of the "Bread of the Presence," but Jesus indicates, according to the conversation, that they were innocent (without guilt). In this particular case of hunger, Jesus informed the leaders that "mercy" took precedence over "law." In the course of this encounter, Jesus also explained this principle of "mercy" by reminding them of the Sabbath. Jesus corrected their theology by saying, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" (**Mark 2:27**). In other words, Jesus is simply saying that under normal circumstances one would adhere to the Sabbath regulations, but there may be extenuating circumstances in which mercy takes precedence over law.

The relationship between the Old Testament incident of David (**1 Samuel 21:1-6**) and the apparent, not real, infringement of the Sabbath day by the disciples lies in the fact that on both occasions one did that which was forbidden by God and the other forbidden by the religious leaders. Jesus did not directly address the leaders' accusation against the disciples, but, rather, stood with the Pharisees on their own ground and assumed for the sake of argument that the disciples profaned the Sabbath. Jesus reasoned that since it is always "lawful" to do good and to save life on the Sabbath, then, both David and the disciples were within the "spirit" of the law (see **Isaiah 58:6-7; Luke 6:6-11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6**).<sup>[43]</sup>

The same principle that Jesus set forth in this confrontation with the religious leaders may be applied to other commands of God. To apply the same logic about "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**" to **Matthew 5:32** is appropriate. To illustrate this point still further, neither man nor woman was made for the marriage law, but the marriage law was made for their benefit. In other words, there may be mitigating circumstances, as discussed above, wherein "mercy" takes seniority over "law." Larry Richards' statement about the principle of mercy is to the point:

David's need was seen by God as more important than the law's regulation. And the priest's service to Israel was, of course, more important than the Sabbath prohibition against work. In each case a principle of mercy—of deep concern for human need—took precedence over what was technically a violation of law. David and the priest broke the law but were adjudged innocent. Isn't it possible that those who suffer the tragedy of divorce and who remarry do commit adultery, as David committed sacrilege, and yet are adjudged innocent? Doesn't the law's provision of divorce and its expectation of remarriage indicate that God can and does deal with divorce and remarriage with a mercy quite unlike the attitude of ancient and modern Pharisees who are preoccupied with legalities. . . . *It is here (Mt 19) that Jesus points out that divorce was permitted because human hearts are hard, not because God desires divorce. Divorce was an expression of God's mercy, not an affirmation of his ideal will (Italics mine—RDB).*<sup>[44]</sup>

### Hezekiah and the Passover

God ordained that the Passover be observed on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month of Nisan (**Numbers 9:5**). But there were those who could not meet this requirement because of extenuating conditions beyond their control. Thus God gave an “exemption” to this regulation (**9:6-7**), and, as a result, God informed the Israelites that the feast could be observed on the following month on the fourteenth (**9:8-12**). These extenuating circumstances created an “exemption,” not an “exception,” to the normal procedure. This incident of Hezekiah and the Passover is an excellent illustration of biblical situational ethics. The people-in-the-situation made the difference.

According to the Chronicler (**2 Chronicles 30:2-5, 18-27**), Hezekiah, king of Israel, decided to celebrate the Passover “contrary to what was written” (**30:18**). Hezekiah discovered that the Passover “had not been celebrated in large numbers according to what was written” (**30:5**). Even though he had no direct word from the Lord, nevertheless, Hezekiah ordered the priest to slaughter the Passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the second month (**30:15**). Even though many “were not ceremonially clean (**30:17**), still, he prayed for everyone who set his heart on seeking God:

Although most of the many people who came from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets his heart on seeking God—the LORD, the God of his fathers—**even if he is not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.**” And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people (**30:18-20**).

Is this not another example of biblical situational ethics? Because of mitigating factors, God made an “exemption” to His law.

### Two Brothers: Eleazar and Ithamar

Who were these two brothers? They were the sons of Aaron and the brothers of Nadab and Abihu. Eleazar and Ithamar witnessed the death of their two brothers (**Leviticus 10**). Why were they killed? Moses informs us that they disobeyed God and were destroyed. On the other hand, these other two brothers disobeyed God, but they were not destroyed. Why were they spared? Did the heart have anything to do with the two sets of brothers? Did the heart play a part in God’s reaction to the four brothers in His dispensing of judgment? Were Nadab and Abihu involved in high-handed rebellion against God’s commandment? Were the actions of Eleazar and Ithamar also high-hand rebellion against God’s commandment? It appears from the context of **Leviticus 10** that their actions had to do with their mental state as a result of their having just witnessed the death of their two brothers.

Moses writes that Eleazar and Ithamar *burnt* the “sin offering” rather than *eat* the “sin offering” as commanded by God. To begin with, Moses was highly incensed at their actions. Moses writing in the third person says,

When Moses inquired about the goat of the sin offering and found that it had been burned up, he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron’s remaining sons, and asked, “Why didn’t you eat the sin offering in the sanctuary area? It is most holy; it was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by



making atonement for them before the LORD. Since its blood was not taken into the Holy Place, you should have eaten the goat in the sanctuary area, as I commanded.” Aaron replied to Moses, “Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the LORD have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?” When Moses heard this, he was satisfied (**Leviticus 10:16-20**).

Is this biblical situational ethics? Did God exonerate their course of action because of controlling factors? Did the “situation” make the difference in God’s reaction to a violation of His law?

## CONCLUSION

Did Jesus teach “graded absolutism” or the principle of “mercy” over law? Did Jesus illustrate this righteousness of “leniency” in His dispute with the religious leaders in **Matthew 12**? Jesus says that it is always lawful to do good and to save life. Jesus illustrates the principle of “to do good” and “to save life” with the example of David and the “Bread of the Presence” that mercy took priority over law. In other words, law gave way to mercy.

Jesus conceded that His disciples broke the *rabbinical rules* about the Sabbath, and, then, He used this episode as a basis to call attention to the principle of mercy. Jesus presented the case of David in order to call attention to the principle of kindness, even with a known violation of the law. Even though David and his men disregarded the law of God, nevertheless, they were guiltless. Again, one witnesses the standard of mercy overriding law. Jesus develops this concept of compassion by saying, “**If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath**” (**Matthew 12:7-8**). Even if the disciples had broken the Sabbath, the necessities for life (food) would have overridden law.

Is there not a grave responsibility upon everyone to look at variations dictated by concrete situations in the lives of people before rendering a decision of condemnation? It is before the judgment of God that everyone is responsible for his or her good-treatment or ill treatment toward God’s people. When Christians fail in honoring an individual’s precarious situation in life, there is no lasting worth to what they are doing. The vocation of every Christian should be renewed commitment to the triune God; a renewed commitment to the words of Scriptures handed down by the Holy Spirit to assist everyone in loving and serving Him, the Creator of heaven and earth. May God help every believer to practice the words of Paul to the Romans.

Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand (**Romans 14:4**). Why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat (**Romans 14:10**). We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

<sup>3</sup> For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement



of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Romans 15:1-7).**

The principle of mercy over law and the idea of the “weightier” matters of the law are still valid perceptions that need examination in dealing with conflicts in the lives of men and women. Everyone must deal with the *then* and the *now*.

#### APPENDIX: CITATION OF SCRIPTURES

<b>Isaiah 58: 6-7</b>	<b>Luke 6:6-11</b>
<p>“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">to loose the chains of injustice</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">and untie the cords of the yoke,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">to set the oppressed free</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">and break every yoke?</p> <p><sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your food with the hungry</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">when you see the naked, to clothe him,</p> <p>and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?</p>	<p>On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. <sup>7</sup> The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. <sup>8</sup> But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, “<b>Get up and stand in front of everyone.</b>” So he got up and stood there. <sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “<b>I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?</b>” <sup>10</sup> He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, “<b>Stretch out your hand.</b>” He did so, and his hand was completely restored. <sup>11</sup> But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.</p>

<b>Luke 13:10-17</b>	<b>Luke 14:1-6</b>
<p>On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, <sup>11</sup> and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “<b>Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.</b>” <sup>13</sup> Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she</p>	<p>One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. <sup>2</sup> There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. <sup>3</sup> Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “<b>Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?</b>” <sup>4</sup> But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. <sup>5</sup> Then he</p>

<p>straightened up and praised God.<sup>14</sup> Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”<sup>15</sup> The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?<sup>16</sup> Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”<sup>17</sup> When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.</p>	<p>asked them, “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?”<sup>6</sup> And they had nothing to say.</p>
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<sup>[1]</sup> See Dave Miller, “Matthew 12 and Situation Ethics,” *Firm Foundation* 105 (December, 1988): 1, 6

<sup>[2]</sup> See Bert Thompson, “Did Jesus Teach Situation Ethics?,” *The Spiritual Sword* 45, no. 3 (April 1991): 3-6.

<sup>[3]</sup> See Joseph Fletcher: *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966). For an excellent analysis of Fletcher's' Situation Ethics, see Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation Ethics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Dimension Books, 1972). This book is a transcript of a public dialogue between Professor Joseph Fletcher and Dr. John Warwick Montgomery.

<sup>[4]</sup> Graded absolutism holds that there are more absolutes than one. It is the pyramid of values in accordance with God’s own nature. Each particular command of God is absolute in its own sphere. There is a hierarchy of laws within God’s kingdom.

<sup>[5]</sup> John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), 251, writes: “The 20th-century sense ‘homosexual,’ which first came into general usage in the 1950s, seems to have arisen from an earlier American slang term *gay cat*, which originally denoted a young male tramp who was the companion of an older tramp. The implications of a homosexual relationship which this carried had led by the 1930s to the use of *gay cat* for any young male homosexual, and the application of *gay* to ‘homosexual’

was probably generalized from this.”

<sup>[6]</sup> See Jean Staker Garton, *Who Broke the Baby?* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany Fellowship, 1979), 13-19 for an excellent treatment of “Seduction by Semantics.”

<sup>[7]</sup> See John S. Powell, *Abortion: The Silent Holocaust* (Texas: Argus Communications, 1981).

<sup>[8]</sup> See George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

<sup>[9]</sup> See George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (New York: New American Library, 1946).

<sup>[10]</sup> Powell, *Abortion: The Silent Holocaust*, 30-39.

<sup>[11]</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>[12]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[13]</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>[14]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[15]</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 120: “Only the end justifies the means; nothing else.”

<sup>[16]</sup> Graded absolutism, unlike situation ethics, does not approve of wife-swapping, adultery to get out of prison, blasphemy, abortion of unwanted babies, harlotry to teach maturity, nor premarital intercourse.

<sup>[17]</sup> KJV

<sup>[18]</sup> KJV

<sup>[19]</sup> Norman Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 34.

<sup>[20]</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 120-133.

<sup>[21]</sup> For a thorough investigation and analysis of this philosophy (“man is the center of all things”), I recommend Norman L. Geisler, *Is Man the Measure?: An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

<sup>[22]</sup> I am indebted for much of this discussion to Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 113-132.

[23] The KJV renders this as: “weightier *matters of the law.*” All Scripture citations are from the NIV, unless stated otherwise.

[24] The KJV renders this as: “greatest commandment.”

[25] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 35.

[26] In using “exemption” rather than “exception,” one seeks to maintain the absoluteness of the law. See Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 110 for an excellent examination of this distinction.

[27] Ibid., 95.

[28] See Jesus’ illustrations concerning “mercy” taking precedence over “law,” in **Matthew 12:1-8**. Even though Jesus did not address Rahab in His confrontation with the religious leaders, nevertheless, there is still the same principle of mercy taking precedence over law.

[29] Jonah’s conversation with God is an excellent example of God’s mercy: “But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (**Jonah 4:1-3**).

[30] Norman Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 91

[31] “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

[32] “Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

[33] Leroy Garrett, “What I Believe About Situation Ethics,” *Restoration Review*, vol. 12, no. 10 (December 1988), 150-51.

[34] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 134-45.

[35] Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics*, 93.

[36] Geisler prefers the expression “graded absolutism” to “situation ethics” because of its current usage—everything goes. The expression “situation ethics” today

represents a philosophy that is anti-God. In other words, a belief that there are no absolutes, everything is relative. For example, there is no such thing as right and wrong, that is to say, good or evil.

<sup>[37]</sup> Geisler, *Options in Contemporary Christian Ethics*, 93.

<sup>[38]</sup> Miller, “Matthew 12 and Situation Ethics,” 6.

<sup>[39]</sup> I am granting the traditional interpretation of Hebrews 10:25 that teaches one cannot miss an assembly on Sunday morning. Although this Scripture is relied upon by many Christians to teach that one must not skip a Sunday morning service, still it must be brought to the attention of the reader that this verse does not teach that interpretation. This Scripture teaches that one must not abandon, give up, or toss aside.

<sup>[40]</sup> For a more detailed discussion of divorce and remarriage, see Dallas Burdette, “Divorce and Remarriage,” *Ensign* 19, no. 1 (January 1991: 17-20; also *Ensign* 19, no. 2 (February 1991): 27-31.

<sup>[41]</sup> See Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

<sup>[42]</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 119.

<sup>[43]</sup> See Appendix for Scripture citations in full.

<sup>[44]</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 234-35.